Gorgeous Healing:

Liminality in Memoir and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

James Ricks

Prof. Deborah Miranda

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Dedication

I'm writing this for you, Popo. Our lives and stories span time and experience, across oceans and decades. I am your grandson and I've known you all my life and yet I think I've never spoken more than 10 words to you at a time—I'm sorry my Cantonese isn't so good. Nonetheless, we are family. I am grateful everyday for what we share. We have different stories, but we are part of one together: our family's. It begins before you or I can remember and brings us to this moment. Besides memories, love, good food, gifts, it is something that we pass down and that binds us to one another.

It shapes us, too. I have been reading, writing and recollecting for months now, and I realize how deeply touched each of us is by this history. It strengthens and distorts the ways we love, and the ways we live with others. I have learned so much about you and others like us from this process. As I sit down to write, I hold all of us close, spread through time, space and continents oceans away. This is our story, narrow and broad. I am honored to write it.

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Introduction

"Why didn't they get me? Well, 'cause I was *fast,* baby. Some monkeys are so fast, they're more like ghosts, you know?" (Vuong 242)

My mother's family have been escaping for nearly a century, beginning in Dongguan, China, catching their breath for a moment in Saigon, Vietnam, which became Ho Chi Minh City and then they were running again, touching down in Utah, the United States, where I was born, and I didn't know it at first but the running didn't stop and I've been running, too, ever since. Growing up in the United States, largely separated from those places and family members—who in turn are scattered across the United States, Canada and Australia—that make up our history has been disorienting. In this project, I read Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, and learned in its pages how to finally read back into this family history—how to understand the traumas and experiences my family endured over time and generations, how that history distorts the ways we live and love, and how to begin to heal a family like mine.

Vuong's book is both a textbook and a roadmap to this project. In the text, Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog, similarly strives to understand how to live and love in a world that has been historically violent toward him and his family. A queer, Vietnamese man growing up in Connecticut, his experiences give language to the phenomenon of historical trauma, to the ways in which traumas persist over time and generations, and how that history becomes part of an intersectional experience that is being a person of color—a child of refugees—in the United States. Moreover, the book is itself an exercise in not only describing those experiences, but in growing and healing from them. In its structure and style, Vuong not only invokes an academic language to define these experiences, but in the act of writing the text itself provides a model, a roadmap, for others seeking to do the same. Memoir segments, informed by interviews with my

grandmother and experiences from my own life, practice and inform both these aspects of Vuong's text. They mutually inform the conclusions—academic and personal—throughout this project. These coalesce in a conception of empowerment that is borne of occupying an intersectional identity like mine—or Little Dog's, which is in turn informed by the theoretical language of theorists Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Homi K. Bhabha.

Beyond the literature of Vuong and the lived text of my family, these theorists' texts provide additional framework to the development of this project. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* similarly invokes personal experience to develop a theory revolving around the mestiza identity, an intersectional, racial identity that occupies the "confluence" of multiple backgrounds (100). The mestiza exhibits a liminality, "continually walking out of one culture / and into another"—that is not prescriptive. Existing in such a state of in-betweens, the mestiza walks between cultures and exercises mobility in a racial landscape. Such movement, we recognize, is critical. In Bhabha's *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha demonstrates similarly that the vehicle of oppressive, racial hierarchy—described through the lens of postcolonial thought—is similarly not static. The location of the colonial authority is always adapting: though the imposition of authority results in a hybrid population, colonial authority sequesters and iteratively reestablishes itself in the process of identifying and divesting difference. To be free, Vuong's characters teach us, one must be "gorgeous"—fast enough to stay ahead of the colonizing, signifying monolith of disavowal, something mestiza, something beautifully in-between.

Chapter I, *Section I*

> Their life in Vietnam was really rough when they first arrived. They moved in with his older brother's family, and my mom had to perform all these menial tasks for them, like a housekeeper or nanny. Take care of kids, housework, cooking, cleaning. That year they arrived, they conceived their first son. But because my mother was working so hard, her son passed away on her back. Because she had him in a pouch on her back. And he died there on her back. That was really tragic. (Ricks)

This comes from a series of interviews I did with my grandmother before this project. She describes our family history: how our ancestors fled Dongguan for Vietnam, how their children evacuated Vietnam for the United States. Many of the stories I had heard before from my mother growing up, of bomb sirens, corrupt government officials, rice rations and open water. Our family is colorfully defined by violence and conflict: like silhouettes against a bonfire, the edges of flame holding our forms and defining our outlines. But I had never heard of the nameless boy who died on my great grandmother's back.

> You don't know the year you were born? How about how old you were when the war started?
>
> *A pause.*
>
> "When the war started, would have been around 1935, because when my sister was born, it was in the war and that was in 45. When it was 1931, 1932, nothing. The war hadn't begun just yet. (Ricks)

Like stakes in the earth, the wars simultaneously anchor our history and tear it asunder. They give a timeline to my grandmother, who can't remember the year of her birth. They give my brother and me, children anxious to hear about my grandfather's time as a soldier in the war,

a place to start, but rob him of his voice when he opens his mouth to speak, his head shaking slowly. In kind, the brightest, most salient moments in our shared lifespan are these violent instances that ultimately force my mother and her family into a boat bound for the United States. In hopes of writing new history, they put so much else aside. Not looking back, they leave the unmarked grave that holds the unnamed boy in an unknown, forgotten neighborhood in a city that is no longer called Saigon, whose story I don't hear until I'm 23 years old, and even then, whose story is a moment in passing. And this, ultimately, is a history and a memory I inherit, whose pages are burned, blackened and erased, yet whose words are still felt decades later. Yet, as ambiguously tethered to that history as I am, I am not the only one whose relationship to the past is so precariously defined.

Little Dog of Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, similarly shares a relationship to family and to history that is defined and fragmented by conflict. In particular, the novel's composition, of fragmented stories, histories and narratives cobbled together reflects the history as well of my family, whose members and experiences are strewn and singed across decades, continents and an ocean. The protagonist, in recounting that story, does so within a letter to his mother, Rose. To tell that story, then, is to rewrite it—or revive it. Vuong's epistolary style notably does not follow a chronology. Its rememberings take place in Vietnam, and then describe the protagonist's own childhood; the books returns to Vietnam and then skips to the protagonist's adolescence; it travels back and forth to superimpose these temporally fragmented histories onto one unified plane of remembrance. It's a strategy that is at the narrative core of the book itself, in which Vuong begins,

Let me begin again.

Dear Ma,

I am writing to reach you, even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. (Vuong 3)

Vuong identifies the space that this kind of genealogical writing tries to fill. In its first words, the novel locates his protagonist's story within the context of a traumatized family narrative. "Let me begin," announces his own story; "again" alludes potentially to stories that have come before, his own a fresh exercise in telling that family history (Vuong 3). In the layers of history that such a beginning invokes, Vuong also locates the fragments of experience his novel joins. This he communicates in the language of distance between his mother and himself. In the epistolary structure itself, Vuong alludes to some of that distance, in the implied relationship of writer and recipient that he superimposes on his protagonist's relationship to his mother. Furthermore, it is a letter that she ultimately cannot read, as she is illiterate. Yet, he writes it for the explicit purpose of "reach[ing her]." He acknowledges these limits with "each word I put down is one word further from where you are." The paradox of this line, in putting further distance between the speaker and the recipient in the act of reaching out, prompts us to reconsider the "reach[ing]" Vuong describes. In the same way that Vuong's novel seems to defy the bounds of chronology, coalescing in a family history that joins otherwise temporally displaced fragments, the act of reaching is one not necessarily contingent on the mother immediately present in the novel. He will go on to write about the mother in the time before his protagonist was born, in his early childhood, at present day—the reaching that Vuong accomplishes in this novel might be described as gathering, as his writing joins his protagonist to the mother in spite of and outside of the bounds of a conversation in the present. In this work as

well, then, I write to reach out and to gather the parts of myself and my family, to the unnamed boy who died between the wars in a sling on his mother's back.

One quickly discovers, however, that a body of fragments is more so a body of empty spaces. The unnamed boy, the unknown time between wars, the unknown space—when I am told this story nearly a century a later, it is a skeletal recollection, pared down to its basic units. My grandmother's retelling of this story is striking for its spartan language, which notably omits any mention of emotion until the very end, in "[t]hat was really tragic" (Ricks). My ancestors move to Vietnam; they have a son; my great grandmother is worked too hard; "because [she] was working so hard, her son passed away on her back." Nonetheless, the moment is rife with feeling. In the very event of a son's passing, there is grief that is felt: that he died so close to her, pressed to her back, that she may have felt at times the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, the pulse of his heart against her own. There is frustration, confusion and anger toward the family who would force her to work so hard, that she would be forced to neglect her son this way. Guilt is felt in the repeated "because" of the story, with "But because my mother was working so hard … Because she had him in a pouch on her back." What I am told in this moment, I know, is not a forgetting or an omission, but an erasure, as the affective language of emotion is struck from the telling.

It is that very erasure now which compels me to write. In the language of my grandmother's speech, I feel the weight of that grief—of guilt, confusion and regret. It is the weight still of that child in the pouch, whose body was buried in Vietnam but whose silent burden has been quietly shared among my family ever since. The avoidance and erasure of the language of emotion from my grandmother's recalling of the story is, after all, not healing. Healing evinces itself in recognition; my grandmother's language alternatively flinches from hurt

that so evidently rises to the surface of the text. Her feeling is palpable, but her speech cannot confront it. The language of experience tethers her to it, yet the pain it evokes renders her suspended. This is the space in which I hope to write, to "reach" as Vuong describes, across a chasm of traumatic history and suture shut a wound long since open. This, I learned, was different from the language my family spoke—in which survival was contingent on sacrifice. This lesson is replete in the language of my grandmother, whose words describing the tragedy of her brother's death are an exercise in this very act. She flinches from the experience of loss that this story evokes, its history a shadow of her own.

> Popo: The war was not over yet. I was married on October 25th, 1974.
>
> My brother: But the war was nearly done with, so what did that first year of marriage look like? Did you just go home as a married woman?
>
> Popo: 慘 (caam: miserable, wretched, pitiful, tragic / cruel; savage; merciless). It was the hardest, darkest time of my life. (Ricks)

Like her mother before her, war and marriage shaped my grandmother's adult life. She found herself living with her husband's family and forced to work hard to earn her keep. Before marriage, she described having a job at the factory and attending matinees with friends; in her relatives' house, like the "housekeeper or nanny" role her own mother was forced to fill, she was shamed, verbally abused and degraded, given the task of scrubbing menstrual blood by hand out of the sheets and undergarments of her newfound family (Ricks). When she became pregnant, they limited her food to a bowl of rice and an egg per meal. When my mother was born, my grandmother had no time to care for her. She describes how my mother would "cry and cry" in their room, the pouch her mother had kept on her back traded for the solitude of the bed. In the

hurt that colors my grandmother's language of survival, we see the violence of these moments reflected harshly inward as guilt.

My grandmother negotiated survival with sacrifice and divestment. In particular, I would draw attention back to the circumstances that color the death of the unnamed boy, son of my great-grandmother, whose own infancy is so reminiscent of my own mother's. When my grandmother describes how he dies, she does so in the causal, culpability-laden "because:" "because [her mother] was working so hard … [b]ecause she had him in a pouch on her back" (Ricks). This is to say, "because" my great-grandmother did these things, her son died. My grandmother's language is of course narrow and does not recognize the shared responsibility of her relatives and the patriarchal culture whose work it is she was forced to complete and who stripped both women of their autonomy. Yet having lived a similar experience, my grandmother knows this. Ultimately, one's child lives or dies, and concluding that it was one's relatives' fault does not ameliorate that fact. This is my grandmother's language of survival. Ultimately, it places belief in one's ability to secure safety and comfort for one's family, the same safety and comfort which enables me to write these words. Alternatively, it is a survival that is merciless. In words like "because" that lay blame at the foot of the parent, my grandmother's language signals an internal violence. The emotions of guilt, remorse and hurt that permeate this passage are thus not only felt in sympathy for her mother's plight—but in empathy for having perhaps similarly put her child's health at risk. While this belief, and the actions of her family ultimately secure our escape from Vietnam when my mother is four years old, they continue to manifest themselves in the lasting hurt confessed in her language. She is a lifetime and an ocean apart from the tragedy of the unnamed boy, yet the guilt that his death invokes in her is palpable to this

day. Similar themes manifest in Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* in which the protagonist's experience of romantic love is one also of violence.

These narratives of survival are moreover joined by their shared interest in autonomy. In my grandmother's history, autonomy is the immutable and intrinsic foundation of both guilt and hope. Despite her and her mother's shared inability to care for their children, language of autonomy and culpability is condemnatory—the repetition of "because," for instance, underscoring a guilt in the child's death—while also alluding to hope in the alternative, in not "working so hard," for instance, thereby having the time to care for the child (Ricks). "Working less," of course, is not an option when forced to labor, and this contributes to the condition of suspended guilt and grief that resonates in her speech. It wields the consequences of violence experienced externally to injure internally and eternally. The scenario of survival, love and violence that I explore in Vuong's novel takes place in a similarly unforgiving emotional landscape, yet nonetheless looks very different. The protagonist, Little Dog, experiences similar instances of empowerment, disempowerment and violence in the physical intimacy he shares with his partner, Trevor. I describe how that violence influences the intimacy the boys share, and what it thus means for understanding the kind of intergenerational trauma we witness in accounts like my grandmother's.

In particular, the language that Vuong uses to describe the physical intimacy the boys share in this novel calls to mind the same perpetuation of violence that my grandmother displays in her recollection of the nameless son. The scene begins by recounting a moment of past intimacy with the protagonist, Little Dog, in the dominant role: "… we did it again. His cock in my hand, we began. My grip tightened around the covers" (117). The sentence structure of this passage is blunt and terse—its clipped independent clauses lending it an air of confidence and

calm. Notable here, too, is the focus on hands, both in "his cock in my hand," and again in "my grip tightened on the covers." The imagery of "[hi]s cock in my hand, we began" is particularly hard to ignore. The sentence structure can be read to present a condition, which, having been fulfilled, leads to the "beg[inning]" of the sex, i.e. once "his cock [is] in my hand," then "we [can] beg[in]." Choosing to read the passage this way, the symbols of male genitalia and hands are compelling for their significance in a narrative of control, domination and intimacy. The "cock," after all, is a magnetic symbol for masculinity, sexuality and vulnerability. To hold it in hand, as Little Dog does, is to control the intimacy implied in the sex of the genitalia, and also to control the masculinity that it embodies, too. Though it describes intimacy, its tone at the same time resists gentleness or warmth. The abrupt syntax is choppy, and words like "cock," with its harsh consonant sounds and vulgar connotations, pare down the potential for real intimacy to the more brutal, implied realities of power and control in the scene. Indeed, Little Dog narrates, "And that inertia of his skin … made the task feel, not merely of fucking, but of hanging on." With "hanging on," the task of maintaining control becomes one of desperation. The control that Little Dog describes, however, is not necessarily the same as what might otherwise be called sexual domination, though the two overlap momentarily at the beginning of the passage.

Though this control can be described as the autonomy—or lack thereof—explored previously, it is an autonomy within bounds. This is best explored in the "animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to be eaten," the animal's choice being analogous to that of Little Dog, offering submission to Trevor (118). The bounds I describe are evident in the relationship that Vuong creates between animal and hunter: the animal has limited options in what is ultimately a narrative of inescapable demise. What these bounds mean, however, in Little Dog's relationship to Trevor, is less obvious. The same violence that eventually finds the animal of the analogy can

be attributed to the violence that Trevor shows Little Dog during sex. After all, the passage tracks the transition of dominance in the relationship, from Little Dog holding Trevor's genitalia in the beginning to being the recipient of violent intercourse toward the end. Indeed, the same inescapability is present in the way Little Dog reads Trevor's reception of the incident, with "[R]ecognition flinched inside [Trevor]. This is how we were going to do it from now on." And yet, Vuong's use of Trevor's "flinching" resists a reading of Trevor as hunter in a prey relationship with Little Dog. In fact, if anything, Trevor's flinching more closely aligns his character to Little Dog's, where a flinch itself indicates the anticipation of violence, like prey. To better understand this, it is helpful to consider masculinity within a theoretical framework of intersectionality and liminality

Section II:

Our discussion of masculinity, especially as it applies to Little Dog's relationship with Trevor in this novel, is aided by developing a more precise theoretical vocabulary. To that end, a brief elaboration on the history, use and implications of hegemonic masculinity, intersectionality and liminality follows below.

Hegemonic masculinity, at times referred to as white masculinity in this paper, refers to the kaleidoscope of identities that combine with whiteness to comprise the masculinity performed by Trevor in Vuong's novel. "Hegemonic masculinity" is explicitly cited in other works by Vuong, including an article written for the Paris Review, titled "Reimagining Masculinity," in which hegemonic masculinity is cited for a "he-ness … akin to … aggression" (Reimagining). That being said, hegemonic masculinity has its roots further back in gender studies—dozens of years across hundreds of articles—but is succinctly referred to by sociologist R.W. Connell as "the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an

identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell). In Vuong's novel, however, we will see that a gendered dominance as described by Connell in this early definition is not exclusively limited to intersexual dynamics. Rather, the language of hegemonic masculinity is often leveraged in homogenously male spaces as well, invoking the structure and the substance of gendered hierarchy and violence in the enforcement of racialized or heteronormative power structures. Intersectionality provides a ready vocabulary as well for describing these instances.

Intersectionality in itself is an extremely valuable conceptualization of the variable components that form the foundation of identities and interactions. Originally described by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality helps us understand the relationship among the various components that comprise the hegemonic masculinity described above. Truthfully, in Vuong's book, an intersectional reading compels one to consider the ways in which not only the masculinity identified thus far impart privilege or inflict insecurity, but how that masculinity interacts with class and labor. Nonetheless, understanding the variable autonomy and empowerment of characters via their respective intersecting identities gives language to the interactions taking place between characters in the book, whose identities often do not neatly correspond to monolithic racial or gendered identities, which lastly invokes the concept of liminality, the ambiguous space between an identity and its counterpart. In Little Dog's case, this might refer to his ethnic identity, being raised by Vietnamese immigrants in the United States. It alternatively describes his gender performance, his masculinity not neatly conforming to the hegemonic masculinity performed by white boys with whom he comes in contact. Relevantly, while liminality identifies that middle ground, its origin as an anthropological concept emphasizes its transitivity. Coming from the Latin for "threshold," liminality emphasizes

movement along a rite of passage, as described by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his text, *The Rites of Passage* (Gennep). Liminality is thus impermanent, itself merely a step between stages. What these concepts begin to describe is a landscape of experiences and identities, and a mechanics of movement whereby individuals might negotiate their location. These terms help identify and speak to the multitude of experiences and perspectives these categorizations capture, especially in Vuong's book.

This understanding of masculinity, and the trauma that can come from occupying male spaces helps tease open the significance of the violence between Trevor and Little Dog. Though mentioned in a separate scene, Vuong describes Trevor's navigation of male spaces in an analogy adjacent to that of the hunter and prey, writing: "to be an American boy, and then an American boy with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to the other" (116). The cage in this depiction functions similarly to the theme of control and autonomy in the first passage, instead granting the reader insight into the violence Trevor shows Little Dog as he grabs Little Dog's hair, and "slam[s]" him during the act (117-118). In the imagery of the cage and the gun, I remember watching Westerns with my grandpa when I was young, and learning about the Colt 45, dubbed alternatively as either "the equalizer" or "the peacemaker" for its lethal proficiency. Such violence is replete throughout the American mythos of freedom and westward expansion; Vuong's use of the cage metaphor succinctly communicates the harm it does to American boys and men, whose violence is paradoxically both lock and key. After all, in the quote's construction, Vuong implies that being an American boy in itself is to occupy the cage: to identify with the violence that is American male identity is the cage occupied by American boys, put differently. The extension of this realization, beyond the metaphor then, is not just a confirmation of the futility of violence, but a condemnation of violence as a cycle of

disempowerment in American notions of masculinity. Returning to the scene between Little Dog and Trevor, then, the reader understands alternatively the violence that permeates the passage. Little Dog's submission is not an autonomy of resignation, but rather implicitly identifies the futility of violence. It in part lends the scene its heartbreakingly somber tone.

This realization deftly reinforces the autonomy that undergirds Little Dog's decision to submit to Trevor's violence. Upon first glance, the decision, after all, does not feel particularly autonomous. After all, returning to the animal and hunter metaphor Vuong employs, how legitimate can an exercise in autonomy be if in the selection of an inevitable outcome? The hunter eventually catches the prey, even if the prey attempts to flee. By that same logic, Trevor's behavior in sex ultimately becomes violent; the reader understands that Trevor needs violent domination in the sexual space in order to fulfill his notion of masculinity. Vuong builds this impression with the way the syntax builds from short to long sentences, from constricted clauses to more conversational—natural—sentence structures, whose variation loses that sense of imposed rigidity. Vuong even infuses the language of physical science and natural law, using "inertia," "force" and "torque" to describe a violence that, like natural law, is constant and even predictable (118). Its presence in this passage implies a ubiquity between the act and the observed aggression. Like natural science, its incidence is expected and reproduceable. As we, again, revisit the metaphor of animal and hunter in this passage, it is this violence that plays such an interesting role. The characters do not necessarily conform to those parallel positions in the metaphor. Little Dog may be the animal, but Trevor is not the hunter, recalling the "flinching" that Vuong employed, aligning Trevor's character with Little Dog's. The violence that Trevor perpetuates, rather, is the hunter: it is the violence that, in the previous metaphor of the cage, would keep the animal of the American boy locked up. It is violence itself, after all, that mars

Little Dog's understanding of love, and from which he is tempted to flee. It is violence, too, that hounds Trevor, pressures him to own and shoot his gun, or alternatively to treat Little Dog so harshly and roughly. With this in mind, we can productively reevaluate the criticism of Little Dog's act of autonomy. It is not merely resignation, and it is no mere surrender. In this case, the exercise of autonomy is active submission *and* resistance. The inevitable choice, in which the hunter catches the animal, is not to submit like Little Dog does; it is to respond likewise with violence, and to perpetuate unhealthy forms of aggression like Vuong describes Trevor doing. It is to maintain the sort of rigid masculinity that keeps Trevor in his metaphorical "cage" (page). For Little Dog, to submit is to defy a cycle of masculine violence, and to save himself; "It lets us stop in order to keep going" (118). In particular, this is true of my family, where violence and emotional trauma perpetuates itself in our inability to similarly "stop."

My mom blindsides me with this particular revelation over the winter.

I'm cleaning the table after dinner and she's telling me how happy she is that I'm home; she mentions how quickly time is passing and how my being there reminds her of how much things have changed and then "how much I've learned raising each of you—starting with you and ending with Jillian" and I ask what she means by that and she looks at me long, and starts, "I'm sorry I didn't hug you enough as a child and I didn't say I love you enough and I didn't tell your dad I love him enough and I didn't hug him enough either" and I laugh nervously about it but in my head I'm confused and she's still going, saying she "used to be angry with him when we were so poor starting out and I had to work and leave you at home and we'd be saving money and he'd buy me flowers and the flowers would come but they might as well have been a bouquet of bills because we were supposed to be saving but then even when I came home I would nurse you but I wouldn't hug you or hold you or touch you because *my* mom wasn't like

that either when I was small—she was always working, working two jobs and my dad worked two jobs too to keep us all together and to bring his siblings over so we could all be together and now that your sister is small I'm very intentional and I hold her and I hug her and I brush her hair and tell her I love her" and it's the first I'm hearing any of this and I'm realizing this is what it means to *not stop* and I'm crying now

because I'm looking at you and seeing me and *past* you; I'm in California again and it's summertime and we're at Popo's apartment in the projects and she's showing us how to brush the doll's hair and I'm remembering that she keeps these dolls because she never had one as a kid, but you're telling me now that Jillian is your doll and your sweetheart and your "little, sweet thing" and Popo is brushing the doll's hair like you brush Jillian's now and you both sing the same lullaby, *goodnight, goodnight, loud one* and I can see her holding and cradling the doll and singing to that doll and telling the doll that she loves it and my heart is breaking now remembering how she invited me to hold him, too, back then the little doll that I didn't realize was in fact *that* brother of Popo's who her mother kept in a pouch while she worked and how "tragic it was for them," truly and how hard it still is to see her carry this doll, still and to know how hard it must be then to stop.

How do you stop?

Vuong cannot give us the answer, but his novel nonetheless has some clues.

Considering Little Dog and Trevor as foils for one another, it is important to consider what sets the two of them apart: what makes Little Dog able to submit when Trevor cannot? Without reducing their characters to their respective races, racial experiences nonetheless give us clues for understanding differential forms of control and, alternatively, violence that materialize in the intimacy they share. We have spent considerable time with the cage metaphor of American

masculinity, but it is worth revisiting, if only to suggest that it includes a poignant omission. That is, if the violence that underpins American masculinity and identity is so evidently disempowering in Trevor's experience, it is worth considering the ways in which Little Dog's identity has the potential to conversely prepare him to act when Trevor cannot, exercising autonomy when Trevor is unable. In many ways, Little Dog's identity is nearly the opposite of Trevor's.

Little Dog's identity is one of in-betweens. Trevor is the white American boy whose unquestioned relationship to white American masculinity contains clear—if not hopelessly impossible and problematic—roles and expectations to follow. When the two boys have sex, this relationship is evident in his inability to confront the clear ways his real identity as a queer man conflict with the heterosexual rubric prescribed by a monolithic American male identity. This is clear in the dialogue that surrounds the boys' physical intimacy, in how Trevor describes the act as "fake fucking," the implied genuine intercourse being penetrative like heterosexual vaginal intercourse (119). This mindset surfaces, too, when he expresses that he does not want to bottom for Little Dog, explaining, "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man" (120). In this scene, the coincident pressures of his "American boy" identity, or cage, reveal themselves, as the threat to a desired heterosexual identity, in "fake fucking," is coordinated to an unyielding ideal of masculinity, in "I don't wanna feel like a girl," the use of "bitch" revealing the internalized misogynistic violence that underscores and reinforces their simultaneous presence. The follow-up of "I can't, man" reinscribes the expectation of platonic, heterosexual male-to-male relations between the two boys, as well, invoking the script with which white, heterosexual, American men speak to one another. In all of these scenes, Little Dog tellingly has little-to-no written dialogue. If he responds to this most recent example, it is by "pull[ing] the

covers to [his] chin." It is not to say that Little Dog has no say in the intimacy that takes place, though the extent to which Trevor is comfortable with queer intimacy dictates the extent to which the boys are intimate. Rather, in a dialogue which is as much about race and masculinity as it is about sex and intimacy, Little Dog potentially *has little to say.* That is, while Little Dog learns from and is able to understand Trevor's position, internally realizing, "[t]he rules, they were already inside us," he does not have the same inflexible relationship to a racially or nationalistically prescribed expectation of masculine behavior. He is American, but he is also Vietnamese. While the position he occupies between the two identities at times is a vulnerability, it is a position that grants him the kind of autonomy we witnessed in the scene of the boys' intimacy. Ultimately, if we read the love shared between Trevor and Little Dog as a challenge to heteronormative, white masculinity, it is valuable to consider what Little Dog means in "[t]he rules, they were already inside us." Little Dog understands the masculine identity that Trevor performs, yet Little Dog has a very different relationship to it by virtue of being a person of color.

Little Dog is taught those selfsame "rules," yet their impact is markedly different due to the manner in which he learns them (120). For a white American boy like Trevor, one grows up, is taught and has reinforced that one belongs in similarly white, masculine spaces. The same is not true for Little Dog, who is introduced to white masculinity via the abuse of his peers and even his mother, Rose, at times. Vuong recounts this in an early scene, as Little Dog is bullied on a school bus by white peers whose assaults weaponize his racial otherness as they demand he "say something [in English]" (24). They eventually force Little Dog to say one of their names in English, importantly foregrounding the scene in which Trevor and Little Dog are physically intimate, with "Say my name then … [l]ike your mom did last night." Capturing the multivalent

components of white masculinity, the moment is a lesson in the identities that coalesce in white masculinity, as well as the ways in which Little Dog is categorically excluded by them. The racial components of masculinity here are obvious, and are affixed to the language of gendered sexual dominance by the boys' relentless taunting. Notably, their gender identity as boys is reaffirmed in heteronormative dialogue of having had sex with Little Dog's mother; it is a parallel which also feminizes Little Dog as the recipient. That is, forcing Little Dog to perform the role of the implied woman in repeating the name, "Kyle," queers Little Dog's identity—places him outside the white heteronormative rubric—all by nature of their exercising white masculinity. This is affirmed in the Little Dog's response to their mocking, with "I let their laughter enter me," the sexual resonance in the quote invoking a penetrative sex act (25). Importantly, Little Dog's submission does not communicate the same empowerment or autonomy that he conjures in the scene with Trevor; nonetheless, it ought to direct our attention to the way in which those "rules" of white masculinity are internalized, and how his relationship to that submission changes over time (120).

It is a perspective that not only demonstrates the precariousness of heteronormative masculinity, but prepares Little Dog for the autonomy he wields in his intimacy with Trevor. Though the white boys inhabit a position of authority when bullying Little Dog, Vuong demonstrates through Little Dog's experience the ways in which the performance of hegemonic masculinity depends on queerness. This comes from the inextricability of heteronormativity from whiteness: the sexual metaphor that characterizes the boys' authority over Little Dog necessarily invokes a queer sex act, which Vuong confirms in the language of "let[ting] their laughter enter [Little Dog]," the laughter a symbolic phallus (25). The act invoked in this language is necessarily queer, such that the paradoxical reinforcement of a heterosexual rubric

foreshadows the brittle fragility of the selfsame white masculinity that later disempowers Trevor. Vuong demonstrates this in the way heteronormative language is iteratively employed to counteract moments of queerness. For instance, the forced repetition of Kyle's name necessarily locates Kyle and Little Dog in a sexual relationship. This moment of queerness threatens to undermine the heteronormative rubric through which Kyle holds authority, implied in the "quiver" of his eyelashes, wherein Vuong's use of "quiver" invokes nervousness, anxiety fear—or even fragility and femininity. Kyle thus abates this moment of weakness with adding, "[l]ike your mom did last night," reaffirming the heteronormative masculinity with which he identifies. The same can be observed in the latter part of their exchange. After Little Dog "let[s] their laughter enter [him]," Kyle concludes by remarking, "[t]hat's a good little bitch," the gendered violence of "bitch" reaffirming Little Dog's necessary femininity in upholding Kyle's own precarious masculinity. While Little Dog is traumatized in this scene, we nonetheless witness in Vuong's language the fragility of white, hegemonic masculinity. We mourn for Little Dog's hurt, but his own location outside this selfsame rubric prepares him for the intimacy he shares with Trevor, in which the queer foundation of Little Dog's identity serves to empower him. Unlike Trevor, whose dependence on being dominant and masculine traps him in the violent cycle we witness in the boys' intimacy, Little Dog's lack of that selfsame identity enables him to operate outside the violent, masculine rubric. Inasmuch, then, as the reader chooses to read Trevor's actions not as his own, but as a result of white "American" conditioning, so too is Little Dog's autonomy furnished by his location outside of a similarly prescriptive identity. Nonetheless, these roles can be important forms of coping or survival strategies.

Popo, alternatively, is a caretaker. My earliest memories are of this: deep bowls of pho, of roast duck, char sui, daikon cake, banh xeo—we don't explicitly say "I love you" often in

Cantonese, but this was my grandmother's way. I'd stand at her elbow, newly empty bowl aloft, and she would heap ladles of soup, pointing out "I know you like these ngauyun, a-Choy, so I'll give you extra." She'd continue ladling. "You can tell that I care about you because of how well I know what you like to eat." I would nod and say "thank you" in my accented Cantonese. Without my mom to translate, our conversations wouldn't last much longer than this, but in her giving, Popo communicated volumes—even if I didn't understand completely at the time.

Popo gave freely, but love wasn't necessarily free. I would learn it was an exchange. Reminders of her love were laden with expectation. Standing at the stovetop, she would glance at me as she called attention to the food she was serving. She was my first creditor, writing my contract in salt and fat on her stove. "Here, a-Choy, are your extra ngauyun," she would say, a sideways glance holding the punctuation aloft. As the bowl filled, the empty space in the air grew heavier, and I was never quite sure of the debt I had taken on. Hurriedly, I'd grasp the bowl, give my accented "thank you" in Cantonese and shuffle back to my seat, and she would watch approvingly from behind the counter as I ate, my debt temporarily forgotten. Other times, it was more obvious. If we misbehaved, or forgot to help bring in groceries, she would declare, "act like this—so ungrateful—and I won't love you." We'd gripe about it behind her back. "We didn't hear you arrive! How were we supposed to know?" More pointedly, we would whisper, "what kind of grandmother talks about love like that?" These thoughts I regret, but it nonetheless felt cold to love with strings attached. I grew up hearing that, among family at least, love should be given unconditionally. It felt selfish of her—and it was. Popo had had her love abused all her life.

It was with that very love that her husband, my grandfather, and his siblings exploited her when she was first married. Those first years of marriage, the "darkest" of her life, were typified

by the difficulty of having her first child while her husband was away at war, being chronically overworked by her relatives, and being regularly emotionally and verbally abused (Ricks). She describes the breaking point, when his "evil" sister stole something of theirs and accused my grandmother of fabricating the whole incident while my grandfather took his sister's side. My grandmother describes:

> He hit me—in the middle of this argument. Well, I had never been hit by a man before, so I went ahead and scratched him and took a telephone and I just beat him in the head with it. (Ricks)

I do not intend to belabor whether my grandmother was justified in defending herself against her physically abusive husband. Rather, I think it is worth spending time on how the violence she experiences is interpreted and the role that prescriptive roles play in the realization of the violence she describes.

Ultimately, Popo leverages similarly prescribed societal expectations to justify her actions in the face of the violence she received. How she characterizes the violence is telling: it is not that she suffered violence and—knowing that she did not have to accept violence—fought back. In fact, pointing out that it was the first time she had suffered physical violence at the hands of a man suggests that other forms of violence she might have been more used to, and may have in fact been permissible. To that end, her use of gendered violence in particular could be read to imply that she might have been the accepting recipient of more regular physical violence from women, like Muoi, who were already horrifically emotionally and mentally abusive toward her. Nonetheless, her explicit condemnation of receiving physical abuse from a man invokes implicit gender roles that forbid the kind of abuse that my father visited on her. This is important, as it is my grandfather's attempted enforcement of gendered behavior on my grandmother that

motivates his abuse, in that her disdain for his sister upset expectations of subservience set for wives. Ultimately, it is the same sexist rubric that sanctions this gendered subservience that my grandmother wields to justify her self-defense, thereby forcing her to reinscribe systems of disempowerment. It is the same prescriptive language that accompanies her tacit expectations at the dinner table decades later when I come to visit: an autonomy and a safeguard guaranteed within the borders of the roles we fill and the contracts we sign to one another. Ultimately, we recognize that these roles are defined by the intersection of numerous societally informed expectations—of gender, race and culture.

In Little Dog's case, this becomes even more complicated, bridging racial, cultural and gendered expectations in not only school settings, but at home as well. While Vuong introduces in the event of Little Dog's bullying the fragility and violence of the masculinity displayed by the boys on the bus, it is in the home that we witness the pervasive permeability of cultural barriers in a refugee experience like Little Dog's. Having seen how gendered and racial intersections empower Little Dog's character in his relationship with Trevor, we might expect a similar perspective from the experience of Little Dog's mother. Instead, we witness treatment that in some ways distinctly mirrors that of the bullies. Having told her about the bullying, Little Dog's mother slaps him. This is accompanied by scolding which, like the bullies' taunting, is similarly gendered: "What kind of boy would let them do that," she asks. "Don't you ever say nothin'? Don't you speak English?" (26). Without ever saying it explicitly, her chastising reinforces the same white masculinity the boys impose on Little Dog, with "what kind of boy" similarly questioning her son's masculinity, and "don't you speak English" invoking the same language teasing leveraged at Little Dog by the bullies. The parallels underscore not only the language, but the substance of the selfsame discriminatory masculinity Little Dog experiences on the bus.

In these parallels, Vuong demonstrates the pervasive nature of hegemonic masculinity, as it distorts the ways in which Little Dog's mother is able to express affection for him. Her actions alternate between violence and affection, slapping Little Dog repeatedly and then pulling him close—violently invalidating his masculinity with "[w]hat kind of boy" and then cradling him (Vuong 26). While outwardly disparate and appearing counterintuitive, their paradoxical language is the broken expression of love and protection, effected by the selfsame hegemonic rubric as displayed by the white boys on the bus. This tacitly evidences itself in the location of empowerment. To question Little Dog's masculinity, after all, in "what kind of boy would let them do that," is to suggest a masculinity instead like that of the boys, who similarly invoke the heteronormative sex act to disempower Little Dog on the bus, yet her moments of affection, of "pulling" Little Dog in and cradling him, acknowledge and validate his vulnerability. To subscribe to the selfsame rubric of whiteness and masculinity that undergirds the bullies' actions, however, is to simultaneously identify the acts of affection and vulnerability shown toward Little Dog as effeminizing or enabling. This is richly displayed in her repetition of "[y]ou have to find a way … [y]ou have to because I don't have the English to help you. I can't say nothing to stop them," ultimately repeating "you have to" eight times throughout a single paragraph. The emphasis of "you have to" performs several layers of communication simultaneously. It implies her own disempowerment, placing responsibility on Little Dog. It locates the crux of that empowerment or autonomy in the masculinity that she cannot embody, but he can. Moreover, it attempts the embrace or protection motivated by being his mother, through the emotional violence of the rubric she invokes. She is disempowered by her femininity and her lack of English ability, yet nonetheless is compelled to protect Little Dog. This is all realized in the

violence that is "you have to:" the combination of all these factors in a statement which emphatically disregards and invalidates Little Dog's identity, locating fault in who he is.

Reading this scene with my grandmother's experience in mind, I'm compelled to consider how closely violence and nurture are similarly exchanged. Especially salient is the expression of fear that underscores the language of both Rose in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* and my grandmother's scolding in my youth. Notably, the repetition of "you have to" is an expression of fear (Vuong 26). Its frantic emphasis is the result of palpable anxiety, motivated by the acknowledgement of the danger that can come from lying outside the prescriptive norms of hegemonic masculinity. The exchange—her violence toward Little Dog—underscores a selfsame violence which has taken place internally. That is, if Rose recognizes the danger of femininity and of vulnerability, it is because she has similarly effected that rubric internally as well. My grandmother in this way is very similar. Abused and taken advantage of by those for whom she has been a caretaker, she protects herself and me by communicating love's worth through expectations, exchange and commodification. In lieu of its genuine reciprocity, after all, a care commodified can at least by assigned a price. In the case of Rose in Vuong's novel, Little Dog's narration is able to *see* Rose—to acknowledge in the complicated intersections of her affection and violence the love that underscores their relationship. By doing so, his voice affirms the authenticity of her love, locating the influence of external violence in her dialogue. It is a voice, too, that practices a tacit forgiveness in the generosity it shows her, unafflicted by the same level of anxiety or fear that underscores her dialogue, which prevents her from considering him outside the prevailing lens of hegemonic masculinity. For Little Dog to be able to develop that perspective signals a wealth of growth, which we know has something to do with divesting himself of the selfsame masculinity that is so ubiquitous in these early scenes.

While the queering of those norms ultimately aids Little Dog, we can begin to understand in these moments why arriving at that moment of autonomy takes so long, given the swarm of voices otherwise reinforcing those notions as he grows up.

Chapter II

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of a *mestiza* identity takes these discoveries one step further, imagining the mechanics of mobility and movement in such a metaphorical landscape. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa describes a racial and cultural identity, the mestiza, defined by its location at the metaphorical border between different identities. A new racial experience, the mestiza resist traditional conceptions of uniform racial homogeneity. The mestiza identity is a "new consciousness," founded on an intersectional understanding of race, culture and sexual orientation (99). Anzaldúa writes, "[o]pposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices" which might essentially be identical that Aryan conception of race, "[the mestiza] is one of inclusivity … a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool." Anzaldúa describes this in "*Una Lucha de fronteras /* A Struggle of Borders":

Una Lucha de Fronteras / A Struggle of Borders

Because I, a *mestiza,*
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan
simultáneamente. (99)

In its unification of what may be otherwise considered disparate fragments, Anzaldúa's poetry practices the inclusivity of the mestiza identity. Division is created through language, being written in both English and Spanish, emphasized by the use of italic text as well, which visually distinguishes English from Spanish in the poem as well. In effect, these languages halve the poem, with the first half in English and the second in Spanish. This lingual division is emphasized as well by the slash in the title between "*Una Lucha de Fronteras"* and its translated English counterpart, "A Struggle of Borders" (99). By so doing, Anzaldúa thus symbolically asserts the validity of an experience that spans the backgrounds that these languages evoke, locating autonomy in the union of these halves. Without being able to read both languages, the reader cannot comprehend the entirety of the text, the meaning of which is suspended across the linguistic divide. This is perhaps best described in the grammar of the poem, which is largely one sentence whose initial dependent clause is in English, followed by the independent clause in Spanish. Structured this way, the English half dangles precariously without its complementary Spanish half, which holds the predicate in "*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro /me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio*." Anzaldúa emphasizes this too with the repetition of "because." "Because I, a *mestiza* / continually walk … Because I am in all cultures at the same time"—the discomfort these fragments create reinforces the incompleteness of the English half alone. It is a division that is emphasized as well in the language of culture and race as land. The first lines of the poem establish this framework with "Because I, a *mestiza,* / continually walk out of one culture / and into another." The visualization of "culture" as spaces prepares the reader to imagine the landscape of cultures which one might inhabit, and furthermore emphasizes the boundaries that separate them, in the speaker's "walk[ing]" from one into another. Cultural specialization is captured, too, in the Spanish half, as the speaker describes "*alma entre dos*

mundos, tres, cuatro. Describing the worlds, "mundos," between which the speaker transits, Anzaldúa invokes the imagery of a planet, even, to describe the perceived mutual exclusivity that exists between cultures. Anzaldúa's use of enjambment in the first half supports this reading, dividing the sentence's prepositional phrases—"out of one culture / and into another"—with the space afforded with a line break. Despite the language that cordons these cultures one from another in this poem, the speaker, a mestiza, must straddle them in her walking. This is the impetus of the "inclusivity" about which Anzaldúa writes, which promises to bridge the otherwise estranged sections of the text (99).

It is an exercise as well in bridging scattered fragments of the self; Anzaldúa's emphasis on inclusivity is underscored by the potential for fragmentation that exists in the mestiza individual. We have examined ways in which the poem is divided and unified by a readership whose experience contains both that of English and Spanish speech, yet Anzaldúa communicates the immense burden that comes as well with being drawn to both "sides," so to speak. Specifically, she writes:

me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.

Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan

simultáneamente. (99)

"Me zumba … con lo contradictorio" parallels the language of separation witnessed above, in which the head "buzzes" with that which is "contradictory." The imagined scenario of many voices speaking at once produces a feeling of anxiety, an emotion felt in the rest of the poem as well, through repeated uses of "because," whose parallel structure and sonic repetition build that feeling to a crescendo. These are developed through Anzaldúa's use of norteada as well, where the word's root, "norte," invokes the cardinal direction "north," a source of guidance and

orientation. Regarding "norteada" this way, we read those "voices" to whom Anzaldúa refers as the influence of her ancestors, whose influence one's own life is often considered to be similarly one of guidance and support. Ironically, though "norteada" invokes "north," it does not similarly communicate guidance. Instead, it signifies a loss of direction, especially by having been turned around excessively, such that north is hard to find. This is not to say that the speaker of Anzaldúa's poem, being so afflicted by the confusion of "voices," cannot find direction, or cannot identity the influences of one's ancestors. Rather, it communicates the unique, simultaneous burden that is trying to occupy an identity between spaces and experiences, as contradictory influences are simultaneously guide and lead astray.

This in turn ought to draw the reader's attention to the racial landscapes of Vuong's novel, and the ways in which his characters navigate similar racial boundaries. Certainly, racial division can be mapped onto the character's distinct racial experiences, Trevor being white and Little Dog being Vietnamese American. This ought to be abundantly clear in the racialized metaphor of the cage explored above, wherein Trevor's dependence on an American masculine identity sets him apart from Little Dog, whose removal from that experience allows him to see the cyclic violence committed by white American norms surrounding masculinity. At the same time, however, one must note the ways in which perhaps the characters of Vuong's novel resist a completely dichotomous reading. In the visual metaphor of traditional nations and borders, nations—and bodies—are categorically exclusive. Their existence is delineated by their mutual separation, their longevity a function of that separation's maintenance. Vuong's characters certainly embody elements of such a model, with racially differential experiences, Trevor's whiteness impelling him toward emotional and physical violence, for instance. That being said, in spite of a racial divide, Trevor and Little Dog are still able to share moments of understanding,

love and intimacy, facilitated in large part by Little Dog's ability to see and understand Trevor within the context of his racial upbringing as a white American boy. In turn, this compels us to reconsider the dichotomy of their racial experiences; that is, what equips the boys for their moments of mutual understanding and intimacy? Second, Vuong and Anzaldúa challenge the rigidity of the nations presented in the geopolitical model of race dynamics. While these bodies are supposedly maintained by their mutual exclusivity, Anzaldúa's borderlands theory coupled with the experiences of Vuong's characters articulate an expanded conception of these borders: a longevity not determined by exclusivity, and borders as sites of overlap and shared experience.

While a border on a map may appear a thin, black boundary, the reality of these racial and cultural borderlands is broad and expansive, as Anzaldúa's metaphor of the physical landscape implies a vast and dynamic backdrop against which mixed-race, mestiza identity takes shape. This concept is named in the title of the theory itself, in the "borderland" between nations. The metaphor of land and nations articulates our polar, homogenous conceptions of race and racial experience, and Anzaldúa's description of a borderland in itself creates land and space for persons and experiences that do not necessarily conform to these conceptions. She expands on this idea with additional geographical metaphor. The language of "confluence" imagines these individual factors as rivers, each with their own individual ebb and flow. Individuals' relationships to these factors, conceived often as constituent parts, are thus unique. Bodies of water like rivers may be unrecognizable a mere thirty meters upstream; so too can people's relationship to race and culture differ in the borderlands concept of racial identity. That metaphor is extended downstream too, in which the river may no longer recognizably related to the tributaries that comprise it. While borne of multiple bodies of water, it is in itself something new as well. This is one of the creative powers of the mestiza idea.

The language of confluence introduces multidimensional experiences of race, invoking the language of intersectionality. The visual metaphors of race and borders can easily be interpreted one-dimensionally in terms of race alone—yet I have somewhat misleadingly attributed these racial landscapes thus far to the nebulous umbrella term of "racial experience." Vuong's book, coupled with the visualization of confluence in Anzaldúa's borderlands theory, prompts us to consider the multidimensional ways in which racial experiences coalesce. Racial experiences, after all, identify many different attributes or experiences that differentially affect individuals according to race, coalescing finally in racial experience. In Vuong's book, this is evident in the text's exploration of gender, sexuality and race, which coalesce in the hegemonic white masculinity that Vuong describes, invoke the various intersections among characters' whiteness and masculinity and lead to experiences of shame ultimately expressed in cyclic violence. Racialized experience is not determined by race alone. Instead, Anzaldúa writes of the mestiza identity that it comes from a "racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination" (99). While these may vary greatly from identity to identity, these intersecting factors nonetheless help give language to the experiences of Trevor and Little Dog in Vuong's book. Previously, we determined how Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog, is successful in identifying and dismantling forms of violence perpetuated by Little Dog's friend and partner, Trevor. Revisiting that scene allows us to develop a deeper understanding of how, using Anzaldúa's mestiza theory as a blueprint.

The language of Anzaldúa's mestiza theory lends support to the previous reading of the dynamic between Trevor and Little Dog. Specifically, I would like to once again revisit the pivotal moment of Little Dog's autonomy, in which he recognizes the violence of Trevor's love, and resolves instead "lower[s]" himself, his submission an antiviolent act that rescues himself

from the cyclic violence that motivates Trevor's masculine dominance. An earlier reading of this scene might problematically suggest an essentialist basis for this action: that is, that Little Dog's being Vietnamese somehow predisposes him to the actions he performs. Prescriptive language—which could be misconstrued as foundational essentialism—exists in Anzaldúa's theory as well, in its reference to a prescriptive idea of a mestiza identity, originally defined by José Vasconcelos as "inclusive" of many cultural backgrounds (Anzaldúa 99). Misreading could result from extending a prescriptive idea of mestiza inclusivity to attribute the actions of people of mixed backgrounds to a multicultural heritage. Indeed, this is one way to interpret the "cage" metaphor that Vuong writes of Trevor's white masculinity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: one might assume that in "to be an American boy, and then an American boy with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to the other," Vuong attributes masculine violence to Trevor's being "American" (116). Certainly, in Vuong's language, it is worth pointing out that violence accompanies American masculinity, in his use of "American boy" and "American boy with a gun," yet the metaphor of the cage does not villainize an American identity or masculine identity. Rather the cage's association with autonomy and freedom ought to draw our attention to the effects of different racialized and gendered experiences on one's ability to practice autonomy. This same nuance is echoed in Anzaldúa's text, as she goes on to describe a mestiza identity that is not solely the racial and gender identities the individual embodies, but an experience of traversing an analogized landscape among them.

Anzaldúa's theory ought to draw our attention to dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment in the racialized text. For instance, as she develops her analogy of geography and the mestiza experience, she writes, "it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank … A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat …

reduced to a common denominator of violence" (Anzaldúa 100). This ought to draw our attention back to that selfsame episode in Vuong's book, in which Little Dog considers Trevor's use of a gun, and describes Trevor's relationship as an American boy to violence. Parallels between the imagery of this scene and Anzaldúa's about violence along the metaphorical riverbank suggest the central importance of autonomy in the mestiza experience in Trevor's disempowerment. The gun in this case serves the role of creating the dichotomy Anzaldúa describes, of being armed or unarmed—of being the oppressor or the oppressed.

Remembering one of the key exchanges between Trevor and Little Dog, after Trevor voices discomfort with bottoming, Trevor poignantly delivers, "I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch" (Vuong 120). Trevor's identity is underpinned by othering, his masculinity as much a function both of reflexive exclusivity in "not a girl" and "bitch" as it is a prescriptive rubric of attitudes and behaviors in its implied dominance and heterosexuality. Little Dog's identity is, conversely, akin to the inclusivity about which Anzaldúa writes. Again, I would draw the reader's attention to Little Dog's silence in the scene, bearing in mind Anzaldúa's point considering a mestiza resistance toward western notions of racial purity. Little Dog's response to Trevor's racially motivated masculine identity is not to fall back on some conception of a Vietnamese male identity. Nor is it to likewise invoke the same violent masculinity that Trevor demonstrates. Vuong's character demonstrates the ability to understand Trevor's actions deeply and empathetically, yet does not exhibit those same actions himself. Anzaldúa's writing provides the framework for understanding the dynamic at play between these characters.

Ultimately, Little Dog's ability to practice autonomy in this moment has everything to do with the cultural "confluence" about which Anzaldúa writes in her text—that same confluence that underpins her use of "norteada" and the contradictory voices to which it refers (Anzaldúa 99,

100). By this point, we have determined that something about the differential racial experiences of these characters imbues them to act in different ways when confronted with the intimacy they share: something that runs contrary to the "rules" of hegemonic masculinity, to which they are both subjected to throughout the text (Vuong 120). Within the language of racial experience, and the intersecting identities and experiences that that language contains, we have also determined that Trevor's sociocultural foundation, in whiteness, has particularly rendered him unable to exercise the autonomy that Little Dog can, in "lowering" himself, and in avoiding the cyclic violence that Trevor's actions perpetuate. We know that Little Dog's experience is more varied—even more complex—given the influence of his mother and grandmother, who are immigrants to the United States, but to attribute to their influence alone would fallacious as well. After all, we have witnessed the influence of his mother, and how her intimacy is exchanged simultaneously with violence that imparts some of the same sociocultural hallmarks as Trevor's actions. The key is not merely that Little Dog has other sociocultural or gendered influences that imprint themselves on his identity by having lived around them—it is in that moment of confluence itself.

Anzaldúa goes on to describe this moment as "un choque, a cultural collision" (100). Specifically, that language of collision, which invokes the same mixing as "confluence," in the meeting of disparate parts, is useful for its connotation as well of chaos—of violent unsettling. The influence after all of systems of power like hegemonic masculinity, is deep-seated in the patriarchal fabric of culture; its influence is such that Little Dog's own mother, who is Vietnamese, imbibes and passes it on to her son so readily when he is bullied. She compels him to drink milk, its "whiteness" disappearing in him, attempting to "make something of a yellow boy," the act one of preservation via erasure: sublimation of his otherness via the whiteness

symbolized in the milk he drinks (Vuong 27). That something so destructive is facilitated via feeding—the act of nourishment provided by one's mother—emphasizes that clash, in which nourishment is both violence and protection. Their unity is demonstrated in the physicality of the scene as well, as Little Dog's mother slaps him repeatedly before immediately embracing him. These parallel the actions of the bullies, and should stymy an attempt to merely read the mother's influence on Little Dog's life as a supplementary influence, as merely one of the contradictory voices about which Anzaldúa writes in her poem. Rather, the conflict that she presents to Little Dog—of fundamental contradiction between love and violence prompted by the influence of whiteness and the way whiteness locates power in violence—introduces the very "choque," or clash that Little Dog needs to understand how closely love and violence are trafficked in notions of American masculinity (Anzaldúa 100).

Chapter III

The sun has set and the moon is out. As she inches closer to the window, she hears footsteps in the street. Men in boots talk quietly about nothing in particular, their rifles swinging lazily at their hips, cigarettes bobbing in the dark. They pass her door, then her neighbors'. They round the corner and she turns to her husband and children.

It's time.

The moon feels like a spotlight now. She and her family make their way, quietly as possible, from their house to the pier. Though the streets of Hue are empty, she feels eyes from the rooms above the street willing her forward. They cross barbed wire fences, creep past sleeping dogs, arriving finally at the water's edge: at the ocean that starts here and reaches out there. They climb aboard a fishing boat, quietly humming in the water and push out to sea—

—or something closely akin to that. The story is completely fictional, but the woman is supposed to be my grandmother. I was in second grade at the time, and the teacher gave us an assignment to write about our family histories. I could have written about my father's side of the family: the pioneers who crossed the plains and settled with the Mormons in Utah and Idaho. It was a story I knew well, and one my largely Mormon classmates would be able to relate to as well. But I was the only Asian kid in the class. I'd spend at least as much time vouching for my dad's whiteness as I would telling the story. Besides, they expected an Asian story.

This was the same class to whom, several months earlier, my mom had given a demonstration of making Vietnamese spring rolls: part of a rotating series in which the teacher singled out the "cultured" children to have their parents come in and enrich the rest of the class with a "worldly" experience. My mom had brought in several packages of rice paper and great

containers of fillings. She passed the rice paper around to everyone and showed how to quickly dunk the brittle papers in water and wait for them to soften. It was an exercise in care and tenderness she had performed hundreds of times for our family at home. It was easy to tear the paper or overfill the roll—I'm still not very good at it to this day. That day, I had laid mine out on my plate, and was waiting for the rice noodles to come around, when Tyler—I think it was Tyler in the front row—turned around giggling triumphantly to the rest of the class, rice ball wadded in his raised fist, water streaming down his arm and dripping onto the floor. I think my mom laughed and chided him to try again, but it wasn't long before everyone else had produced spit-wad-looking balls of rice paper. I looked down at mine, resting silently on the plate, and was humiliated. From Vietnam, to my mother's hands, to Tyler's clenched little fist—the next time I shared, I would not be handing out rice paper.

This part of me had to be uncrushable. Invulnerable.

This was how I approached my story. I knew my mother was from Saigon; I changed it to Huế, which looked more English, and thereby, more American. The story I had grown up with had none of the trappings of a refugee tale: no guns, no soldiers, no daring plots. I made sure my retelling did. I imagined a daring escape that took place, trading my family's orderly departure for a stealthy getaway through the dusky streets of my invented hometown. I didn't remain a pathological liar all of my growing up years, but for all of elementary school at least, the history I presented was completely machined. Moreover, growing up around so many white folk, doing so I felt was the only way to exercise some level of control over how people saw me. Being the only southeast Asian-appearing kid in school and in church, I was often subjected to questions—at best—and ridicule, at worst. The stories I invented were a way of asserting an identity not couched in bad accents and abhorrent stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the stories weren't inventions. In my imagined heritage, I created something far more akin to a story I knew similarly well: that of my white, Mormon pioneer ancestors who crossed the plains with some of the first wagon trains. explicit threat of physical violence in guns and soldiers, the Anglicization of the city of origin, the images of barbed wire fences and sleeping dogs—what took place in my invention was not only a translation of my mother's family's immigration, but the superimposing of an archetype with the brand of cultural cachet that would render my experience and heritage valid in the eyes of my white, Utahn peers. In Utah, after all, all of the families with whom I went to church also had children with whom I attended public schools. Most classrooms only had one or two children who weren't regular, attending members of church functions. This meant that we all grew up with a prescribed, and deep-rooted respect for pioneer stories. In that religion, depictions of violent persecution valorized Mormon heritage. We sang hymns, for instance, that praised Joseph Smith, the church's founder, for being martyred by a mob in Carthage, Illinois. My mom, growing up, would insist time and again that her family were pioneers, too, in coming to the United States. In my rewriting of my family's immigration, I could forge a history that was "invulnerable," the way I needed it to be. What I could not understand at the time, however, was the simultaneous violence this wrought.

To create a story like this was not only to avoid childhood bullying, but to reinscribe in myself the racism and white supremacy that has affected my family since they arrived in the United States. My mother describes, for instance, how the children in Logan, Utah where her family settled used to tease her for the anglicized version of her Chinese name, "Camloan." In Cantonese, it means "a King's golden seal;" in their mouths, it was transfigured into "camel," and became a source of humiliation. Since then, she has gone by "Kim" instead, and I learned

early the danger that comes with being similarly seen, but my revision of our family's history is to take that reaction one step further. Rewriting my story in the mere anticipation of ridicule is the internalization of the racist violence of my mother's past, to flinch at the possibility of similarly suffering humiliation and shame. Ultimately, however, language like this is the same language of survival I learned in my home, and which keeps Trevor, in Vuong's novel, in the "cage" of masculinity as he similarly "flinch[es]" at the vulnerability of being topped by Little Dog (120). To advocate for my own empowerment and autonomy, I would have to reexamine how I wrote and spoke about myself to exist in the mestiza liminality about which Anzaldúa writes. Turning back to Vuong then, and the way that Little Dog handles this selfsame dilemma, can lend some insight.

After all, to be raised between worlds is not to be handed the solution to the internalized hegemonic masculinity we witness in Vuong's novel. Notably, when Little Dog describes the tension around physical intimacy in Vuong's book, he notes that "the rules, they were already inside us" (120). Though Trevor's misgivings with intimacy are the most outwardly obvious, Little Dog poignantly dispels an essentialist reading of the scene in the ubiquitous pressure of masculine norms felt by both boys (120). Anzaldúa makes this same point when describing the voices that speak to the mestiza individual, with "me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio," describing what I realize is no mere disagreement in "lo contradictorio (the contradictory)," but in my case and in Vuong's the struggle for validity, vulnerability and visibility between internalized those "rules" and aspects of ourselves those rules work to categorically extinguish, such as the truth of my family's immigration history (Anzaldúa 99, Vuong 120). That is, in the history I wrote of myself, I carried out the work of white supremacy—of colonization. This is the power of white supremacy and its ubiquity. Taking the moments of intimacy that exist in

Vuong's work and reading them again, this time through a lens of postcolonial theory, can demonstrate the ways in which these "rules" perpetuate themselves in our language and actions.

In Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* Vuong captures the paradox of writing from a post-colonial identity: in attempting to write from a place beyond the influence of a colonizing influence. Vuong describes his writing in the first few pages of the novel this way:

> I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because.* But I wasn't trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey. (Vuong 4)

Notable first is Vuong's reluctance to define the "they" to whom "they told" refers. We can speculate, of course that it may refer to educators, to French or white American colonizers, to a nebulous body of "powers that be"—the choice to leave the subject in this case undefined implies a coinciding or convergence of these respective entities. This signals two important realizations. First, these different hegemonic groups occupy similar systemic perspectives. Second, that this process of writing "freedom" on which Vuong embarks in the book is widely applicable. To that end, writing, and the process of seeking freedom that it comes to represent, has potential for freedom and for imprisonment, captures in Vuong's use of "sentence." Vuong means "sentence" here in two ways: first as a symbol for writing and for expression, and second as an allusion to imprisonment, as a prison "sentence." Writing, and the English language for that matter, has extensive rules and strictures that one is expected to follow in order to write properly. This has widespread implications for the metaphorical writing in which Vuong partakes, as adherence to those strictures could imply the text's circulation in academic spheres. His expressed refusal to abide those traditional rules, in "But I wasn't trying to make a sentence," imply the opposite intent. This comes as no surprise—the book in its entirety is written as an

open letter to his mother, opening with “Dear Ma”—but is significant nonetheless because his mother cannot read English. Without agonizing over the precise reasons Vuong makes this choice, the choice to write this way is crucial in itself as a practice, as the opposite, he writes, is to “make a sentence,” to imprison oneself, taking “sentence” to imply a jail sentence, by the very act of writing in adherence to those strictures mentioned above, with “But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence.” Additionally, the act of writing in itself is necessarily symbolic of identity formation, as a means by which to render oneself legible to others through the act of communication. As he tries to impart some part of his experience to his mother via this novel-as-letter, Vuong communicates the simultaneous potential and peril of writing. Where writing within strictures—and by extension, within structures—of the colonizer, belies the peril of condemning oneself to a prison “sentence,” the opposite carries the potential and promise to “break free,” with limitations.

The ability of the colonized to free oneself of colonial influence is mitigated by that very genesis of their dichotomous distinction, the act of colonization. Vuong recognizes this in the final sentence of the same paragraph, with “Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey” (4). Vuong here creates a paradox in the naming of these two entities within the predator/prey relationship, distinguishing them yet joining them in perpetuity by their inexorable belonging to the act of predation. The two are thus limited in the differentiation, joined as they are by their given roles, which categorically include them both within the act of hunting. This recalls the writings of such postcolonialist thinkers as Homi Bhabha, who, in *The Location of Culture*, describes a similar relationship between colonizer and colonized: “the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles,

where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid" (Bhabha 159). If we are to consider the predator/prey relationship as described by Vuong within this framework, we are compelled to reconsider the metaphorical significance of its various attributes.

The distance, we conceive, is not borne of some original distinction or dichotomy, but is the attempt at eluding some iterative process of *différance* which in Bhabha's text leads to the perpetuation of "the mother culture and its bastards," (159) and in Vuong's text "the hunter and its prey" (4). This in turn leads us to reconsider the goal of the "freedom" represented by the distance placed between prey and hunter. A preliminary reading of the text might assume racial identities on the poles of the characters in the metaphor—Vietnamese and white American. Vuong instead implies the pursuit of an identity lying potentially outside those respective poles. Having said that, Vuong's voices a skepticism of that very possibility in "freedom … is nothing but the distance between a hunter and its prey." Indeed, Bhabha's text lends insight into the potential implications of the perpetuity of such a relationship, as the colonizing bodies of authority are maintained by the "production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible … mark of power" (Bhabha 158). In the presence, then, of a robust colonialist authority, Bhabha depicts the escape of colonialist forms of authority as near impossible. The poles of difference, Bhabha implies, are not static. Rather, authority is maintained by a continuous "production of differentiations": the power differential that maintains colonial authority is maintained through a perpetual process of differentiation, reaffirming the "rules of regulation" that give rise to colonial authority while maintaining an ambivalent category of differences leading to the subjugation of the colonized. In this iterative process, the production of difference

by which rules of regulation and resulting colonizer/colonized dichotomies are maintained, the permanence and futility of escape in Vuong's text is captured.

For the utility lent it in Vuong's undetermined specificity, the model of the hunter-and-prey relationship helps clarify further the implications of Bhabha's text. Perhaps obvious, the relationship in Vuong's text is one of consumption, wherein prey is absorbed and consumed by the hunter. Interpreting the antecedents for this metaphorical relationship differently than before, we can clarify the limitations of this metaphor as well for our context, and by so doing define further the inner relationship between what may otherwise be conceived of as disparate halves. There is some temptation in mapping the dynamic in Vuong's text onto the halves of the mixed identity. This is at least in part true; we have seen how racial experience differentially affects the characters in Vuong's text—evinced especially in the relationship between Trevor and Little Dog. Nonetheless, as described in the previous chapter, the phenomenon of the "choque" draws our attention to the ways in which racial and other sociocultural factors and identities combine in the mestiza individual (Anzaldúa 100). We might more appropriately focus, then, on the influence of systems of patriarchy and whiteness—such as hegemonic masculinity as it appears in Vuong's novel.

Taking Vuong's metaphor to signal a departure not from one racial/ethnic pole of identity to another, but rather from the system that continually replicates the two, we can identify perhaps those mechanisms by which "the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection" (Bhabha 159). Here it is helpful to explore more deeply the location of colonialist power in a process of hybridization that reinscribes poles of identity through a process of disavowing, where "the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid. Repression should call to mind the work of Freud,

and in so doing unites the artificially manufactured identities of the disavowal practice within one collective body. Specifically, we are reminded then of Freud's work in *The Uncanny,* in which the process of doubling, similar to Bhabha's notion of the "hybrid," marks that which is repressed, or in this case "disavowed," by the colonialist authority (Bhabha159). We see the traces of this in the relationship Vuong describes between the novel's protagonist, Little Dog, and Trevor—a white boy. Describing their sexual relationship, Vuong writes "Trevor asked me [Little Dog] to top him, the way we had been doing it, which we now called *fake fucking"* (Vuong 119). The relationship between Little Dog and Trevor is a model for the creation and maintenance of colonial authority, and we can track through its contradictions and absurdities the negative definition of the rubric of white, heterosexist masculinity by which the colonialist power dynamic of the relationship is maintained. The first form of this is in the quote above, in the invalidation and disavowal of their physical intimacy as "fake fucking," where "fake" signals the lack of penetration, a denotative threshold established by heteronormative expectations of vaginal penetration. Maintaining authority and power within the relationship is extremely important to Trevor, who later implies this in his hesitance to being topped by Little Dog. In this exchange we see the mechanism of disavowal. Trevor asks Little Dog to "top him," but hesitates in the moment: "he tensed, his back a wall. 'I can't. I just—I mean … I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man" (120). The heterosexual rubric of the west is clear in this passage, Trevor's refusal an exploration of its edges and an exercise in the disavowal Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*. Building on the heterosexual privileging in "fake fucking," Trevor reinforces the intermale norms of heterosexual behavior with "I can't, man," placing social distance between himself and the act of gay sex which so threatens his masculinity. Furthermore, Vuong locates in Trevor's dialogue the seat of colonialist authority in

masculinity, as Trevor disavows the disempowerment he feels in feminine identity. “I don’t wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch.” These two sentences carry out the exercise of disavowal, identifying the edges of an identity and confidence based in hybrid iterations of masculinity described by Bhabha, and disavowing the threat to that identity—being perceived as feminine—in sexist language that disavows and dislocates the threat outside his reinforced male, heterosexual identity. “I don’t wanna feel like a girl” defines first that edge, “I don’t wanna feel” implying the norm, feeling like a boy. The tone created by the diction of the statement, “I don’t wanna,” is the intersection of multiple feelings and emotions, among these dread and helplessness. Thus, Vuong in Trevor’s dialogue locates Trevor’s disempowerment in a perceived female identity. This, it must be reinforced, is absurd on a plot-level. Trevor is of course no less a man for taking part in gay sex. Rather, the reaction defines the manufactured edge of the heterosexual rubric, its contradiction an indication of that which is disavowed, implicating its fabricated nature. Lastly, the second sentence captures that process of disavowal. Trevor’s unwillingness to step outside himself and locate a confidence or an identity without the rubric of heterosexual masculinity begs instead the reinforcement of those same standards in “I don’t wanna feel … Like a bitch.” The progression in the two sentences, from “girl” to “bitch,” is not without significance. Girl merely marks the spot of disempowerment—bitch affirms and reinforces the subordination of femininity for the sake of maintaining masculinity. Though implicit, the disavowal is racial as well. If Trevor is unable or unwilling to occupy the “bottom” of the relationship, as modeled by the sex Vuong describes in this vignette, then it is Little Dog who must. It does not have to be explicitly mentioned in the book, then, that Trevor—if he finds it unfit for him to occupy that space—finds it fitting instead to locate those disempowering and misogynistic traits in Little Dog’s person, which necessarily implies an intersection between

those traits and Little Dog's race. Additionally, there is the unmistakable symbolic parallel between "bitch" and Little Dog's very name. This is the final, and most compelling example of disavowal.

Trevor refuses to acknowledge his sexuality, keeping it at an arm's length through a continued process of dislocation and disavowal, evidenced in his relationship to Little Dog. Not to overshadow their distinctive and important differences as characters, the two characters do not inherently occupy two sexual "poles" of top and bottom. This pattern, which can be read as a stand-in for authority or power dynamics between the two, is carefully crafted and maintained. After all, Trevor "asks [Little Dog] to top him" (119). The relationship, and whatever implied static power dynamics keep it or maintain it, are completely fallacious. This invokes again Bhabha's notion of colonial authority, where "the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection … where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid" (159). Trevor is so completely, brittlely dependent on his identity as a straight man and the colonialist rubric that undergirds it, that he must continually manufacture difference, reinscribing those parts of himself that he disavows—his queerness, his vulnerability—in "something *different.*" We come to understand that it is at the intersection of so many phobias and prejudices that this identity is maintained, as it is in Little Dog that all of these undesirable traits are disavowed. Trevor will not be topped, will not be perceived as feminine, and will not communicate vulnerably about his feelings. Trevor has no qualms with Little Dog occupying that niche, and despite his own propensity to feel the same way/occupy the same identities as Little Dog, he locates those selfsame identities in Little Dog by way of maintaining his own. Thus those disavowed items are repeated, not repressed, as something *different*. It is in Little Dog's asianness that Trevor, and the

colonialist authority he represents, locates the nexus of these multitudinous others. While the mechanics of colonial authority contained in Bhabha's theory have important relevance to the hegemonic identities Trevor invokes in Vuong's novel, it is worth considering the ways in which Anzaldúa's theory and Vuong's novel subvert what in Bhabha's theory is a continually iterative process of disavowal.

While Bhabha delineates the means by which colonial authority is perpetuated, its emphasis on the iterative perpetuity of colonial influence as a macroscopic phenomenon represents a potential disagreement with what Anzaldúa would consider the fundamental potentiality of mestiza individuals to undermine colonial authority.

What's more, Little Dog's empowerment within his identity as a Vietnamese American man is located within the intersection of these disavowed identities. This is most apparent in the scene in which he fellates Trevor, the textual subversion of assumed power structures deconstructing the manufactured poles of colonizer and colonized, emphasizing instead an identity which recognizes that hybridity, the very act of recognition an exercise of autonomy that creates a space for empowerment in Little Dog's character. In the sexual dynamic of dominance and submission, Vuong writes of Little Dog, "Submission does not require elevation in order to control. I lower myself" (Vuong 118). First, this text importantly recognizes and invokes the power dynamics typical of sexual relationships. In the very use of the word, "submissive," Vuong invokes its opposite: dominance. There is a ready lexicon for these encounters that categorizes partners along poles of power and control, yet Vuong questions the authenticity of this. This is called into question through the discussion of elevation, with "submission does not require elevation in order to control," calling to mind the physical location of partners within the sexual act, and the typical location of sexual control within the physical top, such that top

converges in meanings, implying both a position on top in the assumed duo, as well as the "top" of the hierarchy in the relationship. Vuong's subversion of this is twofold. Literally, Little Dog is beneath Trevor in the sexual exchange, but Little Dog also chooses his location—by extension, he chooses to put Trevor on top as well. This move is textual, in "submission doesn't require elevation," but reinforced on the level of tone and diction, too: "I lower myself." The language here is subtle but powerful. It is an autonomous act by which Little Dog occupies the position he does, and it is reflexive, in that he lowers *himself*. The body is, if not divorced, disconnected from the self, as Little Dog in this grammatical construction is both subject and object of the sentence. This does two things. It places, first, Little Dog's body in the sexual space, so to speak. It is an object within this exchange that can be manipulated or moved. Importantly, Little Dog lowers it—his body—himself. This implies levels of control. Trevor does not determine, thus, the actions or placement of Little Dog's body. Only Little Dog determines that by this reflexive mode. By doing so, Vuong has located a kind of power or empowerment outside the perpetually dislocated and disavowing colonial mode. Importantly, too, this kind of power does not create distance in order to survive or perpetuate itself, whereas the power-as-disavowal needs constantly to disavow and create difference in order to maintain itself. This form of power is created instead in intimacy, in which the physical and literal embrace is paralleled by the act of submission and embrace of the other. Further, I argue that empowerment—and yet, empowerment is too blunt a word—is only possible at this intersection, in an act of creating closeness and unification rather than disavowal.

The self-effacement I practiced in altering my family's history, my mother's choice to conceal "Camloan" in the more palatable English, "Kim"—Bhabha's theory of colonial authority, of white supremacist "sovereignty," captures decisions like these in that process of

disavowal (159). Considering whiteness, for instance, as a locus of colonial sovereignty, its authority is maintained via the disavowal of that which is not white. This of course is a fluid; its iterative exercise maintains the categorical sovereignty of whiteness in America, and is thus the motivating force behind actions like Trevor's, who despite being active in his sexuality expresses shame at the thought of being topped, of being "like a bitch" (Vuong 120). We witness here the broken rubric of hegemonic masculinity, in which Trevor's sexuality is irreconcilable with the heterosexist standards of hegemonic masculinity, while his identity nonetheless as a man within that very rubric prevents him from assuming a role deemed feminine, suspending him in shame. This is potentially as well the significance of the silence in the defeated "I dunno," which can be read as a literal revelation of the failure of white, hegemonic masculinity to continue to form the foundation of Trevor's identity (Vuong 120). So too are signifiers of difference divested in the choices of my mother and me. And I realize that, if power and control, like they appear in the hegemonic masculinity of Vuong's novel, are located in whiteness, then it categorically excludes people that look like my mom and me. Nonetheless, decisions like these are made in the belief that proximity to whiteness is the same thing: that by divesting oneself of the signs of the colonized, one could approach power, autonomy and ultimately, freedom. It is the same trap, however, into which Trevor falls, where performing hegemonic masculinity is to move from one end of a "cage" to another. Its broken rubric cannot support him, and whiteness cannot support my mother and me. The internalized rubric of whiteness is a cage in itself, differentiation the movement from one end to the other. What I forgot to account for, was that a cage can keep things out, too.

I ask my grandmother about my grandfather, the man she cared for—and was a caretaker—over 30 years, for which in return he consistently emotionally and verbally abused her.

"I was looking for a really tall, strong man who could protect me. Someone with a very similar personality to me—someone who would stay home with me" (Ricks). And she meant it. My grandmother was willing to bide her time. By the time she met my grandfather, she would still be living at home, but she had her own career at the factory; she had friends, with whom she would listen to and sing opera, and attend matinees at the theater after work. She was in no rush to find love—and then the war broke out, threatening, and ultimately seeing the state possession of her father's corner grocery in Saigon. Her wages at the factory were enough to buy her matinee tickets and food, but she still depended on her parents for a place to stay. Enter my grandfather.

Popo: I didn't think much of him… I thought we could be friends

Mom: Did you think he was especially handsome?

Popo: Not really. *A pause. A phone goes off.* He was a tiny guy … not really what I liked. (Ricks)

That said, war, it turns out, can powerfully affect the ways we love.

Popo, I'm trying to reconcile the grandfather I knew with the one you dated.

It almost sounds romantic—him, a soldier, stealing away under cover of darkness to see you.

And you hear the thunderclap of his motorcycle in the narrow street outside,

Or knuckles against the door,

Or footfalls on the stairs.

"Have you been to Vũng Tàu beach?" you ask me.

No, I answer. I haven't heard of it.

On a surprise date, two hours from home,

He drives you to the land's end.

To the beach, where the blankness of the ocean,

Enwraps you on all sides.

And the only way back is the way you came,

And there he is. He can show you the way back.

He can describe how to get home.

He can draw directions in the sand.

And you can hold onto him while you ride.

The ocean is closer than you thought.

Truman: Did she find it romantic, his sneaking out to come see her, or just kind of strange?

Popo: I never asked him to. He always did it on his own.

Safety can resemble love if the conditions are right.

Mom, do you remember when we lived in Utah, and we went south to Logan? You told me it was where our family first settled after being sponsored to the United States, after months on a boat and then in a refugee camp in Malaysia. I remember trying to imagine what it must have been like, to have lived so close to ocean for so long, only to find yourself surrounded by empty fields and towering mountains. We visited previous homes, spots you would play with your brothers, catching grasshoppers and building clubhouses out of spare plywood and lonely

afternoons while your parents worked. Decades have passed since you lived here, and you note how much it has changed. “These buildings are new,” you note to yourself. To me, it still feels very empty, the low-slung rambler style homes slouching beneath the height of the mountains nearby, and, squinting, it can all look like horizon and I wonder how much different the ocean is really.

> The decision by government officials to disperse Vietnamese refugees throughout the United States precluded the development of ethnic enclaves that would reinforce ethnic values and identification. Policymakers anticipated that dispersing refugees would accelerate the assimilation process. Refugee families and individuals thus have little choice but to accommodate themselves to an alien culture as rapidly as possible. (Matsuoka 341)

You made me “Proud to be an American” back then, the way your voice would crack yelling the lyrics to Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the U.S.A.” in the car. You would sometimes wipe away tears afterward, “I still remember the little flags they gave us at our swearing in.” This country was the way that we escaped the communists, who “took your great-grandfather’s business,” and eventually it became home. It was this country, however, that evaluated us, split up our relatives, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings—and stranded you in Logan, Utah, and years later I can count the neighbors I have had of Asian descent on one hand with fingers to spare. Growing up in Utah, surrounded by people who did not look like me, I would learn being American meant making up for my complexion. It was there that I learned the language of colonial authority, self-taught with the help of peers, friends, neighbors, and family—and to love the country for it. It very well may have been more physically dangerous to stay in Vietnam—

grandfather fought for the south Vietnamese, after all—and yet, like Popo standing at the edge of the ocean, choosing to love something is so much easier when there isn't a choice.

I had the chance to meet Lee Greenwood in passing a few years back when he sang at our university. I was taking pictures for the paper from beneath the stage.

He caught sight of my almond eye and visibly flinched.

A younger me envisioned an alternative to my history that asserted its validity with the permanence and invulnerability of that of my peers' and my father's families. To be beautiful, however, is to inhabit vulnerability. To be gorgeous is to be temporary; survival lies in the liminality among origins, times and spaces. The final pages of Vuong's novel destabilize these metaphysical foundations of intergenerational violence. Beauty, survival, permanence—Vuong describes a landscape of liminality in which these are recast, to be reimagined as interstitial endless-yet-bounded spaces akin to the "Borderlands" of Anzaldúa's mestiza theory.

Vuong paradoxically locates permanence in impermanence. Little Dog describes this in the final pages of the novel, describing the fleeting, beautiful moments that etch themselves in the permanent memory. Though to describe a permanence paradoxically located in impermanence is perhaps a simplification bordering on misreading; Vuong's language suggests, rather, that these moments achieve permanence by virtue of their transience. The moments Vuong describes are categorically impermanent. Specifically, Little Dog recounts the "sun … coming on, low behind the elms" such that he "can't tell the difference between a sunset and a sunrise," and "lose[s] track of east and west" (238). Though fleeting, the sunset is permanently memorialized in Little Dog's recollection. The confusion or obfuscation the narrator describes lends the event something of permanence as well, given the cyclic pattern of the sun's rising and

falling. Given the way in which sunrise and sunset bookend the day, signaling its beginning and end, the near fungibility of the two in this instance serves to obscure those endpoints. That is, unable to tell whether the day is beginning or ending, the day is caught in a liminal position—both ending and beginning at once. This is cemented, too, in the significance of "east and west," likewise indicating the location of the sun at both sunrise and sunset. In the context of the passage's use of days to symbolize time and impermanence, the selfsame liminal confusion between east and west calls to mind the rotation of the earth that furnishes sunrises, sunsets, day and night, as the cardinal directions own "objective" orientation is thwarted by the spheric nature of the earth. The underpinnings of these metaphors and themes laid out, we can consider their relevance to Little Dog's story, and to similar stories of survival like that of my grandmother and my family. This connection is effected as Little Dog notes of survival, "[b]ecause the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing." Immediately, this statement strikes the reader as strange or defeatist for initially perhaps describing a survival sustained only by the consistent threat of death, like a sunset wrought on the sky only by the impending night. To truly apply the same relationship to survival, however, that Vuong applies to the sun requires greater nuance. The assertion, after all, that survival exists counter to the threat of death is not incorrect, but it is not their constant opposition to which Vuong would draw our attention, but rather that survival exists, like the sunrise or sunset, in suspension between the two, and in a likewise cyclic permanence.

It is into this paradox that beauty is introduced, which both creates and is created by that liminality. Vuong ultimately writes of beauty that "to be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted" (238). This statement should first of all draw our attention to the previous description of sunsets and survival, in which survival "exists only on the verge of its

own disappearing," the same way in which to be "gorgeous" requires being seen, and potentially hunted, both describing a state of definitional impermanence in being. Though the two phenomena, survival and being gorgeous, are thus similar, Vuong notably describes them in separate instances, ascribing parallel definitional relationships to the two, while inviting space for misalignment in their being proposed separately. Put simply, by not describing one's "survival" and being gorgeous in the same breath, Vuong invites us to consider not only their similarities, but their dissimilarities as well. To be sure, liminality accompanies each, in the way survival exists in its disappearance and being gorgeous in its being hunted. Where survival, however, describes resisting or evading death, being "gorgeous" is notable for its intentionality—its agency. Vuong, after all, uses "beauty" instead of "gorgeous in other sections of the passage: "I am thinking of beauty again, how some things are hunted because we have deemed them beautiful." To be beautiful, then is to be vulnerable, and to have that value assigned in "deemed … beautiful." To be gorgeous, however, is distinct from being "deemed … beautiful." "Gorgeous," alternatively suggests presentation—its lexicon belonging to queer identity and queer performance such as drag—such that being "gorgeous" is to not only exist in liminality, but to create those liminal spaces through presentation. This is lent significance in the process of colonial authority and disavowal that Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*. "Beauty" invokes standards of attraction and beauty that are culturally founded, defined and perpetuated in the process of "deem[ing]" that Vuong describes. That is, to be "deem[ed] … beautiful" is to have one's beauty located in the prevailing sociocultural matrix that espouses colonial authority. Alternatively, "gorgeous" connotes a fundamentally distinct notion of beauty, counter to prevailing heterosexual cultural norms and beauty standards.

In being "gorgeous," Vuong introduces autonomy through that implied presentation act (238). Through the lens of Bhabha's theory, we recognize the implications presentation and beauty then have for the empowerment and autonomy of the individual. The dislocation and disavowal that underpin traditional beauty standards disempower the individual. Their beauty, how they are perceived and thus their legitimacy are interpreted through the colonial lens. The site of that validation, in the gaze and in being "seen," does not change under Vuong's notion of being gorgeous, yet its resistance to those selfsame heterosexual standards resists the disempowerment and erasure that otherwise pervades these encounters. That danger is always imminent, and is recognized as Vuong writes that "to be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted," as "hunted" carries the immutable risk of existing outside of prescriptive norms. Inasmuch as we recognize, however, the ways in which beauty and being "gorgeous" can be understood as signifiers for the worth of individuals within and without a colonial or heteronormative value system respectively, Vuong communicates in being gorgeous the stakes that come with either being "deemed … beautiful" or "being gorgeous" autonomously. If we accept Bhabha's explanation of colonial power and disavowal, we recognize then to be someone like Little Dog, whose identity—or beauty—lies outside of monolithic, heteronormative structures of value, to be valued within that system is not in fact a form of legitimate survival. Rather, it is to be subjected to the same process of fragmentation that produces colonial notions of worth—to be fragmented, disavowed and thus "deemed … beautiful."

Ultimately, this vehicle of splitting serves the violent authority of whiteness and masculinity in Vuong's novel. This we witness in the way Trevor navigates his masculine identity in his intimacy with Little Dog, and near the novel's inception as well, as Little Dog is

bullied by his peers in the bus on the way to school. Unspoken yet evident in the latter passage, Little Dog acknowledges this in the "face I possess, its rare features in these parts … push[ing] my head harder against the window" to preempt his being seen by bullies (Vuong 24). The language of "the face I possess" with "its rare features" serves to insert distance between himself and his physical body, which is coupled with his attempt to hide those attributes by "pushing" his face against the glass of the bus. By doing so, Little Dog practices the same splitting Bhabha describes, identifying "rare features" of himself that betray his racial otherness, and disavowing them through his attempt at hiding.

The futility of submitting oneself to such a process is captured in the object against which Little Dog tries to hide his features: a window, whose transparency precludes the preemptive disavowal Little Dog attempts. In the actions of the boys that follows, Vuong describes the constellation of violence, whiteness and masculinity that comprise the white identity reinscribed in this passage. This is evident in the sexual dialogue exchanged in the latter half of the scene, as one boy violently "grabs [Little Dog's] shoulder," commanding him to "say something [in English]," to "say my name … [l]ike your mom did last night" (Vuong 24–25). The features of hegemonic masculinity populate this moment of dialogue—heteronormativity in the implied sex act of "last night," the misogyny of leveraging Little Dog's mother as a symbol of dominance, the racism implicit in the inferred subjugation of an Asian woman—yet Little Dog, as the recipient of this language, complicates these efforts even as they are reinscribed. The command to "say my name" after all, locates Little Dog within the feminine role in the invoked heteronormative sex act, queering the heteronormative foundation of the authority wielded by the white bullies in this scene. In the language of Bhabha's postcolonial theory, Vuong's depiction of this scenario underscores the hybridity that motivates that splitting—the persistence of

liminality, created even as the colonizing or oppressing influence asserts itself. Though Little Dog suffers in this scene, his presence queers the very rubric by which the boys assert themselves and are a foreshadowing testament to the kind of beauty about which Vuong writes in being "gorgeous."

Yet, merely not conforming to the manufactured hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity is not freedom. Rather, the liminality that exists in moments in like these provides the space in which we can be gorgeous: as Vuong writes, "[t]o be gorgeous you must be seen" (238). In Vuong's novel, we can recognize the risk that comes with being "seen," in the violence that accompanies hegemonic power structures. Simultaneously, however, moments like those with the bullies remind the reader that those norms are manufactured; their paradox underlies what Vuong describes in the bullying scene as "the dialect of damaged American fathers" (24). It is not always safe to be seen—to evince one's beauty in being "gorgeous"—yet in describing that liminal space which Little Dog inhabits, Vuong describes what Bhabha might refer to as hybridity, which Anzaldúa would remind the reader is itself a space in which the mestiza or mixed individual can be powerful. In his novel, Vuong reflects on this in the metaphor of celestial bodies, which describe the relationship between liminality and being gorgeous.

Vuong's celestial metaphor establishes language for the relationship between liminality and being gorgeous. In the final portions of his novel, Vuong invokes the visual and physical metaphor of celestial bodies to convey the mutually reinforcing relationship between liminality and gorgeous beauty. Vuong establishes this in diction such as "our planet … [t]he world," and "the sun," but the relationship moreover is captured in references to the movement of planets as they relate to time and space, such as the continued emphasis on "sunrise" and "sunset" as denoting the beginning and end of days, themselves referring to the simultaneous rotation of the

earth about the sun (Vuong 238). In particular, Vuong emphasizes planets' ability to destabilize a sense of time:

> If, relative to the history of our planet, an individual life is so short, a blink of an eye, as they say, then to be gorgeous, even from the day you're born to the day you die, is to be gorgeous only briefly. (Vuong 238)

For the sake of understanding how liminality and gorgeous beauty interact in Vuong's book, this quote is extremely rich for its selfsame liminal language, confounding the reader's conception of time. Placing the sense of time we experience as people in the context of the planetary, Vuong deemphasizes the duration of time spent being "gorgeous." After all, from the standpoint of the billions of years inferred in the metaphor of the planet, whether one is gorgeous "from the day you're born to the day you die" is as visually brief as a momentary instance. A life becomes therefore a liminal space in itself, both the entirety of a span of a person's life, yet simultaneously a momentary blip in a cosmic timeline. The purpose of Vuong's writing this is not to be trite, nor to deemphasize the suffering that sometimes spans those lifetimes, the years spent in oppression and encountering traumas. Rather, recognizing that real survival—being vulnerable enough to be "seen"—is not always possible, Vuong emphasizes instead that to be truly gorgeous, to be seen as oneself, has intrinsic gorgeous beauty. In the description of a similarly impermanent sunset, itself again recalling the rotation of the earth, Vuong describes how in that moment "it was ever mine to see," even if only for a "few crushed minutes." Contrary to a rubric of beauty imposed and constructed, Vuong's, founded in the celestial, intrinsic orbit of planets, asserts a transcendent matrix of beauty. Its permanence has an authority and a body that supersedes that of people, in a movement that is constant and itself permanent.

Conclusion

At the end of this project, I reflect on the quotation from the end of Vuong's book, as Little Dog's mother, Rose, muses "Why didn't they get me? Well, 'cause I was *fast*, baby. Some monkeys are so fast, they're more like ghosts, you know? They just—*poof* … disappear" (Vuong 242). I am struck by the language of the supernatural, of change and of movement, moving through space and forms, from person, to animal and to spirit. The characters of Vuong's book, existing among the identities Bhabha describes as both reinscribed and disavowed, struggle to be seen and be loved throughout the novel's pages. Imagining a spatial and temporal landscape, as described by Vuong's allegory of space and planets and Anzaldúa's borderlands, it is their ability to exercise not only mobility, but magic which saves them, destabilizing notions of power and disempowerment that otherwise entrap characters like Trevor in the cage of hegemonic masculinity. As I reflect on the bearing this brings to my family, I am reminded of the despair and guilt I have felt all my life for a great-grandmother, a grandmother and a mother who have all borne the burden of that baby who died on my great-grandmother's back: the ways in which love and the language of its expression has been so distorted by the experiences my family have suffered.

I am remembering that "to be gorgeous only briefly," in the context of a planetary history, can appear the same as being gorgeous for a lifetime. Though not billions of years, my family were refugees for the better part of a century. Our history has so long been defined by it; my grandmother counts the years up to her birth by the bombs that fell on Saigon. It is a beautiful gift, a gorgeous gift, to have been extended the physical safety and the love and support of my family in spite of all that. In Vuong's novel, it is moments of love and intimacy that flourish gorgeous beauty: in the love shared between Little Dog and Trevor, in the devotion

shared by mother and son. For a history like my family's, marred and defined as it is by a violent and tragic history, it is their love which has furnished for me the safety that enables me now to gather all these stories in this project, to extend that selfsame love backwards now, to hold us like the planets in gorgeous rotation.

For Popo:

I grew up hearing tall tales of you,
How you crossed the entire Pacific from Vietnam,
Fending off greedy men, braving seas of pirates.

And like a pirate yourself,
With treasure sewn into your clothing and tucked in your hair—
Gold. Which you hid,
And after which you named your children.

"Listen, Choy," mom says—my name,
Which to me sounds like "cabbage" or "crunchy" in Cantonese,
But she says means "man of caliber,"
"We used to be very rich."

She told me this in Las Casitas,
In the projects, where we sunned on sandstone,

The air brimming with summer and asphalt,

And us coming home to you.

In the kitchen, you showed me the gold,

Hidden all these years in bouillon cubes,

Poured from amber bottles of fish sauce,

And stowed in weighted pearls of ngauyun.

“X” marks the spot—

Criss-crossed chopsticks tell me where to dig in.

“You know I love you, a-Choy?” you ask.

And when the bowl is empty, you fill it again.

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